

Stepping Stones by HobbitSpaceCase

Series: [The Lost Boys \[3\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: M/M

Language: English

Characters: A few background OCs, Billy Hargrove, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2018-01-18

Updated: 2018-10-18

Packaged: 2022-04-23 02:50:02

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 3

Words: 8,832

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Three and a half years after Hawkins and heartbreak, Billy meets Steve Harrington again.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

This doesn't necessarily have to be read after the previous two stories in this verse. It'll probably make sense, I think, if you don't feel like reading those.

The major plot points that happened were: Billy and Steve kissed at the quarry while both of them were in pretty bad mental places, and Billy pinned a lot of hopes and dreams on the ensuing relationship. They were together through spring semester of their senior year, but then Steve's dad got him a job with his company in Indianapolis, and Steve told Billy they were just messing around and they broke up.

Indianapolis was barely a fucking city. Compared to LA, it was practically a small town. If Billy hadn't spent the last four years of his life living in an actual small town, he might think it was one. Lucky for him, Hawkins had reshaped his expectations, made him grateful to find buildings taller than two stories and 24-hour corner stores where he could buy cigarettes after the bars closed. Indianapolis also had Roy's Body Shop, with a manager more than happy to hire a guy with three years' experience working for Hawkins' only mechanic while he saved up the money to move from the tiny shithole of Hawkins before it killed him.

He would have preferred to move to move to Chicago, or even all the way back home to Cali, but he told himself that rent was way cheaper here than the Windy City or his sun-drenched home town of LA, and he almost managed to believe himself, too. Almost managed to convince himself there wasn't a certain brown-eyed brunet with strings still tied around his heart even four years after Billy got dropped like he meant nothing. That would be pathetic, and Billy didn't do pathetic. Not after moving out of his dad's house a year after graduation and promising himself he'd never let anyone make him feel small like his old man did again. So, he told himself Indianapolis was cheap and big enough to make him happy, got himself a job and a little apartment north of Monument Circle, and

didn't look over his shoulder every five seconds for floppy brown hair and the prettiest face he'd ever known.

He did such a good job convincing himself, in the end, that when his path finally did cross with Harrington he almost didn't even notice.

The evening was cold, gray, and all around miserable - in other words, a regular Indiana January evening - when he walked into the little diner after work to grab dinner before heading over to the 21 Club to celebrate finally finishing up work on the Pontiac they'd had in the shop for almost a month, stomping slush off his boots and breathing in warm air and the smell of cheap coffee and greasy food. He stalked up to the counter with his hands shoved in his pockets and slid onto a stool with a sigh. The waiter came over while he was busy unwrapping himself from the layers of hat and scarf and coat and gloves keeping him from freezing to death, and he mumbled out an order for black coffee and a hamburger around the glove between his teeth.

The guy didn't move or even acknowledge him. Billy finished pulling his gloves off, setting them on the pile he'd built up on the stool next to him, and looked up.

His breath caught in his throat. For an instant, he was seventeen again, freezing his way through his first Indiana winter and dreaming about wrapping his Camaro around a tree off some winding Hawkins road. "Harrington?" he said, voice thick and surprised and matching the stupid look on Harrington's face. "What are you doing *here*?"

Harrington scowled. "Working," he said, eyebrows pinching down over brown eyes just as pretty as Billy remembered - though the ridiculous fluffy hair was shorter and the stubble was new, and neither was at all unattractive. "And I could ask you the same thing."

Billy shook off the shock and the memories, leaning forward against the counter and settling his chin in his hand. "What's it look like I'm doing?" he asked, lowering his voice and staring up at Harrington with the guileless face he used to charm middle aged women into buying parts they didn't need for cars their husbands had bought. "I'm buying dinner."

The frown lines above Harrington's eyes deepened. "Right," he said, voice flat. Billy watched him scribble something down in his notepad and slide it over to the kitchen staff before stalking down to the other end of the bar to whisper in the ear of an older woman wearing a matching apron to his own. She was a tall, solidly built woman, gray hair tied up in a messy bun, and she was thoroughly unimpressed by the wink and the smile Billy gave her when she slid a mug of coffee across the counter in front of him.

Billy glanced at her name tag and adopted the deep voice again, looking at her through thick lashes that women usually went crazy over. "Hey, Bethany. What happened to my other waiter?"

"He's on break," Bethany said, staring him down.

"Any idea when he'll be back?"

"When you leave."

Billy deflated, sitting back on his stool in confusion while something unpleasant squeezed his chest. Sure, he'd been kind of a dick to Harrington three and a half years ago before the guy moved and after they broke up, but Harrington was the one who dumped *him*. Correction, the one who hadn't even cared enough about him to think he was worth dumping, because they were just *messing around*. Bethany's eyes softened.

"Look, kid," she said, and Billy tried not to bristle at the term, "he's had a rough year, and today was a particularly bad day. Why don't you come back in a week or so, and maybe he'll be a little less liable to bolt." There was a softness to her eyes that was far too knowing, and Billy leaned back and stuck his tongue between his teeth, squinting at her as the unpleasant thing in his chest squeezed tighter and more questions popped up in his mind.

"Yeah, I'll do that," was all he said. She smiled, then turned away to serve other customers without another word. A few minutes later, she set a plate with a burger and fries in front of him. It was probably a good burger, but it tasted like ashes in his mouth. When he finished his meal, Steve hadn't reappeared, but the waitress had stopped by twice to refill his coffee and offered him a free slice of pie that he

accepted just to be polite. He didn't feel much like celebrating anymore, but he did feel like getting drunk, so he forced the pie down his throat, slapped down too much money, and left while the waitress was busy frowning at a table of guys who'd tried to get a little handsy with a woman who, from the look of her, could probably beat in any of their faces.

It was stupid, he *knew* it was stupid to be so affected by seeing Harrington.

It was just.

He'd never really let himself acknowledge the reason he'd been unable to move out of Indiana after graduation, but he'd at least grown honest enough with himself to know that he'd expected something entirely different if he ever did run into Harrington again. Expected him to be wearing nice suits and taking pretty girls out to fancy restaurants with money made on nepotism, not serving food in a grungy diner after a "bad year." It made Billy want to dig deeper, find out what had happened to upend pretty, perfect Harrington's pretty perfect life. It made him want to get drunk enough to forget all about Harrington's stupid fluffy hair and pretty face and the body he'd once mapped out with shaking, reverent hands, to forget the only man who had ever made Billy think *worship* and *confession* and *love* when he got on his knees for what had ended up as just a bit of fun.

By the time Billy made it to the 21 Club, he'd worked himself into the kind of mood he hadn't felt since the last time he saw his father, when they'd run into each other at the Hawkins grocery store before Billy's move. His old man had looked him over with such contempt that Billy'd gone home with only half of what he'd planned to buy and spent the evening shaking on his ratty second-hand couch and chain smoking through a pack of cigarettes till the tremors faded.

Indianapolis, it turned out, was a helluva lot more progressive than the tiny stretch of Indiana Neil Hargrove had moved his faggot son to, and he didn't have to spend this freakout hiding out alone and wishing he weren't a broken, disappointing piece of shit. Instead, he got the option of drowning his misery with what was probably half the queers in the whole state, a place where being a faggot just meant

he fit right in.

“Tequila,” he said to the bartender, after glaring his way into a free bar stool. “I’m getting drunk tonight.” It was his favorite bartender, an effeminate man named Andy who never took Billy’s shit no matter what kind of mood he was in. He’d also been serving Billy since before his twenty-first birthday even after clocking the fake ID immediately, though, which in Billy’s book makes them basically friends. Andy leaned against the bar and raised an eyebrow at him.

“Honey, I don’t know who raised you, but around here we like to use our manners when we ask for things.” Billy glowered, and Andy rolled his eyes, amending his statement. “Okay, I do know who raised you and he was a fuckin’ dick, but that still don’t excuse the words that just came outta your mouth. I didn’t hear a single please.”

“Please shut up, please tell me there’s someone pretty here tonight who wants a quick fuck, and please mind your own damn business and give me some fucking tequila.

Andy reached over the bar with a sardonic smile and patted Billy’s cheek, jerking his hand away when Billy moved to swat it. “There you go,” he said. “Was that so hard?”

“Yes,” Billy said, petulant. Andy rolled his eyes at him again, but he also got the tequila, so Billy decided to be gracious and take his own advice about shutting up.

By shot number three, he was feeling pleasantly buzzed, tension unwinding from his shoulders and a grin sliding onto his face. The noise in the club was picking up as the evening wore on, and the sound and smell and sheer presence of a bunch of drunk, dancing queers washed over Billy like waves on the beach, almost as calming as the alcohol.

“Well that’s a happier face,” Andy said with a grin as he passed by to pour round four. “I might even be able to fulfill your second request without worrying you’re going to bite the poor boy’s head off.”

“Don’t suppose you’d gimme all three and shut up for five minutes too?” Billy asked, lazy and teasing with the shimmering beginnings of

contentment blanketing the words.

“Course not,” Andy said, smirking back, “but I think you’ll forgive me when you see the pretty young thing behind you. That boy’s begging for a good fucking, or my name’s Olivia de Havilland.”

“Olivia de Whorevilland, maybe,” Billy muttered. Andy snorted, but Billy was already turning to look in the direction Andy was pointing. For a moment, the floor was a mess of unresolved humanity, laughing and talking and dancing and merging together into one big mess of queer, sweaty bodies under the dim lighting. Then they resolved into smaller groups and individuals, and Billy felt the breath rush from his body, tension lodging thick in his throat at the sight in front of him.

Leaned up against a wall perpendicular to the bar, drink in hand and dark eyes surveying the room in a way that *very much* looked like he wanted to get laid, was none other than Steve Harrington.

“Pretty, isn’t he?” Andy said behind him, misinterpreting Billy’s sudden stillness.

“Yeah,” Billy said, eyes glued to Harrington as some blond twink strutted over to lean against the wall next to him. “Thanks for pointing him out.” Billy slammed his shot glass back on the counter along with enough cash to cover the drinks and tip and stood, stalking through the crowd to Harrington. Harrington stiffened fractionally after Billy swerved around a pair of lesbians giggling softly together, cutting his eyes in Billy’s direction. When Billy arrived, there was a smile on his face and tension in the set of his shoulders. The twink he’d been talking to attempted to glare at Billy for about three seconds before realizing that was not a fight he was going to win and strutting away with his head high to find someone else.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Harrington said, the slight slur to his words belying how much he’d had to drink.

“Harrington,” Billy said, and faltered. Now that he was here, standing in front of a smiling Harrington leaned against the wall, tilting his head the smallest amount to look up because he’d forgotten how much taller Steve could make the inch difference between them feel,

all his brains went on vacation, the four tequila shots sloshing unpleasantly in his belly.

Harrington looked away first, though Billy thought that might have been because he was incapable of looking anywhere but Harrington's face. It'd been so long since he'd seen that face up close, the moment at the diner hardly counting, and only now was he realizing how many little details he'd forgotten. There were changes, like the thick hair peeking through the v in his shirt where he'd unbuttoned the first few buttons, and the five o'clock shadow Billy had already taken note of, but the freckles and moles dotting their way down his cheek and neck till they disappeared beneath his shirt were constellations Billy had once known how to navigate, till Harrington left him and he lost his way.

But he was here, now. Standing in front of Billy again, a chance he'd never really thought he'd ever get.

He wanted desperately to reach his fingers out and touch, remap the forgotten paths and relearn the softness of Steve's skin. Instead, he clenched his hands hard enough to leave marks in his palms and kept his arms by his sides.

"Why are you here?" Steve asked.

"To get drunk," was on the tip of Billy's tongue, till Steve's head turned back, deep brown eyes boring into his with too much intensity. "Always said I was gonna get out of Hawkins," he said instead, and the frown lines made a reappearance on Steve's forehead.

"I would have thought you'd go to California."

"This is a pretty piss poor excuse for a city, but it's got its positives."

The joke fell flat, too honest, too raw, but Billy couldn't care much when Steve smiled again. "Wanna go to my place?" Steve asked, and it felt like the spring of '85 again, three and a half years gone but Billy still remembers his lines. Breathes his agreement into the charged space between them and pretends the ending might still be a surprise.

Steve reached out, tangled their fingers together, and Billy could sooner have taken on the Pacific in all her wild glory than resisted Steve's pull. He returned Steve's smile with one of his own, an honest expression he felt like he was still learning how to make some days, but one that felt deceptively effortless with Steve's palms sliding against his own.

He'd spent so long clawing his way back up the cliff his life had gone right over once already, but it seemed he would always fall for Steve.

2. Chapter 2

Steve lived in walking distance. They kept a careful space between their bodies as soon as they left the club, close enough for a few attempts at stilted conversation, but not close enough to touch. It was agony. It was the best thing that had happened to Billy in years. It was the worst thing that had happened to him since the first time he'd let Steve kiss him.

It was nearly impossible for Billy not to just stare at Steve the whole way back to Steve's place like a lovesick loser.

Steve's khaki pants weren't quite as tight as he wore them in high school, but they still cupped his big fuckin' dick and showed off the shape of his ass pretty nicely, as far as Billy was concerned. If that was all Billy was staring at, it'd be one thing, but he was gone on every part of Steve. Couldn't stop staring at Steve's fingers (the memories from five minutes ago of those long, pretty fingers sliding against his own mixing with more distant memories of those fingers deftly working him open), Steve's mouth (that fit so nicely against his once that it'd seemed like fate or destiny or some other bullshit like that, and he wondered if it still would), Steve's anxious profile lit by flickering streetlamps next to him (so similar to the few times in high school when he'd wake up to Steve standing by the window in his room, hunched over and constantly in motion, running his hands through his hair and playing with his pajama sleeves, till he noticed Billy was awake and came back to bed, muttering something about nightmares; and oh god had Billy already made a huge mistake?).

His life was a fucking travesty.

But Steve had invited him back. Steve touched Billy first, and asked him if he wanted to follow him home, and Billy was a fucking Labrador who would never say no to any scraps of affection Steve Harrington threw his way.

By the time they reached Steve's place, a little brick building that had clearly seen better days, Billy felt a little bit like he was going to throw up his entire being, splatter all over the sidewalk like a plate smashed over a too pretty face. Steve directed him up the stairs to the

second floor, dug keys out of his pocket with graceless fingers, and fumbled the little silver key at the end of the ring into the last door in the dimly lit hallway. Inside, he followed Steve's example, hanging his coat and hat and scarf on the hooks in the narrow entryway and toeing off his boots as Steve stepped further into the apartment. His hat dropped to the floor by his boots, but he was too busy watching Steve to care.

"Welcome to my humble home!" Steve said, spinning around with his arms out where the room opened up, nearly smacking Billy in the face and overbalancing. Only Billy's quick reflexes prevented Steve from hitting the floor. "Hah, would you look at that," he said, words slurring together in a way that had Billy wondering how much Steve'd had to drink before Billy saw him. He stared up at Billy with his big ridiculous cow eyes. "I'm already swooning into your arms."

An ugly weight settled in Billy's belly, and he dropped Steve. Steve flailed, arms windmilling uselessly, and hit the floor with a solid thunk and a pained moan. "Guess you're still a fuckin' dick," Steve mumbled, picking himself off the floor.

Impatient and unwilling to listen to any more talking from Steve, Billy shoved Steve against the wall, growling and getting a knee between Steve's thighs. "A fuckin' dick who's gonna get fucked by your big fuckin' dick," Billy breathed in Steve's ear, getting a moan of pleasure this time, if the way Steve was already grinding shamelessly against his leg was any indication. Steve tasted like vodka, and he kissed back equally hard, just as noisy and eager as Billy remembered.

"Yeah," Steve said, head falling back against the door and giving Billy's wandering mouth access to his neck. "That sounds good." Billy got his hands on Steve's hips and pulled him closer, thumbs brushing up under Steve's sweater to find bare skin, licking a stripe up the fluttering pulse in Steve's throat at the same time.

"We sho'move somewhere more comfortable," Steve said, his hands running up Billy's front to his shoulders only to push him away. Billy ducked in for a kiss to Steve's mouth before he backed up and turned, taking in the rest of the tiny apartment. He'd have been happy to let Steve fuck him against a wall, but Steve always liked being more

romantic than that.

The kitchen was to the left right in front of them, the right opening up to a narrow hallway and a tiny living room with a ratty little couch. A little black notebook sat next to the phone on the kitchen counter, and Billy wondered if Steve still kept in touch with all those kids he used to hang out with back in Hawkins. Wondered if Max's number was in there too.

Steve ducked around him, opening the fridge just inside the kitchen. "Want a beer?" he asked. Billy nodded, before realizing Steve couldn't see him.

"Yeah," he said. The shots he'd already downed at the bar had diffused through his body finally, and he felt unbalanced and a little bit fuzzy from both alcohol and Steve. More alcohol was probably the wrong answer, but Billy never claimed to be the brightest bulb in the box. He caught the can that was lobbed at his face, unsurprised to find himself drinking Miller. Steve always had had cheap taste in beer for such a rich bitch. He popped the tab, taking a long drink while Steve grabbed his own. When he lowered his head, Steve was watching him, a second beer in one hand and the rest of the six-pack in the other. He skirted around the kitchen counter that separated the kitchen from the living room, dropped the six-pack on the coffee table, and flopped onto the couch, taking a few nervous gulps from his beer while Billy finished the one in his hand.

"Do you want," Steve started, reaching for another can, but Billy didn't give him a chance to finish. Dropping his empty beer next to the rest, he planted his knees on either side of Steve, cupped his face, and kissed him again.

Steve's hands came up, fluttering and uncertain before he cupped Billy's cheek with his right hand, fingers pressing into Billy's jaw. His other hand slipped into Billy's hair, shorter than it was in high school but still long enough for Steve to get a solid grip and tug his head back, exposing his throat to Steve's wandering lips and tongue and teeth. A quiet whimper slid from Billy's throat, and he felt Steve grin against his skin. His hands slid down Steve's chest, drawing out a moan against his collarbone when he gripped Steve's waist and ground into him, pressing the hard lengths of their clothed dicks

against each other and grinding till Steve was a whining mess, pressing wet, open mouthed kisses into Billy's chest where he hadn't even noticed Steve unbuttoning his shirt, and pressing closer like he wanted to devour Billy whole. Both of his hands wound into Billy's hair, tugging him closer.

Billy leaned down, relishing in the sharp pinpricks of pain against his scalp that sent bolts of lightning through the maelstrom of desire rushing through his blood, licking up Steve's jaw to his ear and whispering, "Fuck, Steve, I wanna blow you so fucking bad, wanna get my mouth around that big dick of yours, see if it's as pretty as I remember." Steve shuddered underneath him, nodding and whining even as he continued to mouth at Billy's pecs. He went easily enough when Billy shoved him back, hands untangling from his hair, pupils blown out and mouth open, red and slick and beautiful. Billy's hands ducked back down, fingers sliding under his sweater and up till Steve got the picture, raising his arms for Billy to pull the sweater over his head.

Steve's hair stuck up in crazy directions after, and *christ* he already looked so fucking debauched. Billy thanked the tequila shots and the beer for the fact that he hadn't already come in his pants and slid down till his knees hit the floor. He kissed a wet trail down Steve's chest and along the line of his happy trail, following it even as it disappeared under those stupid pants, mouthing at the bulge of Steve's beautiful dick beneath ugly khaki.

Choked off whimpers fell from Steve's mouth, and Billy wasted no more time getting his pants unzipped and dragged down with his underwear around his thighs, licking his lips as Steve's gorgeous cock sprang free, slapping against his belly with a wet smack. It was big and thick and already wet with precome, curving slightly to the left just like Billy remembered, and the sight of it made his mouth water. Steve's hands buried themselves back in his hair as he licked up more precome beading at the tip. Billy gripped Steve's thigh with one hand and placed the other on his belly, feeling the clench and release of his muscles as he trembled and moaned. A smirk curled up Billy's lips as he licked a long stripe up the underside of Steve's cock and sucked at the tip, swirling his tongue around and dipping into Steve's slit to taste more. "Wet as a fucking girl," he mumbled, before flattening his

tongue beneath the head and sucking hard.

The shout that tore from Steve's throat was his favorite sound in the world. His eyes flicked up to take in Steve's expression, eyes blown wide as they stared down at Billy and mouth panting open. The alcohol in his system could almost trick him into seeing *love* in the lines of Steve's body.

It was too much.

Opening his mouth wide and doing his best to relax his throat, Billy lowered his eyes and swallowed Steve down, grinning at the memory of how impressed Steve had been the first time Billy'd deepthroated him. The muscles beneath Billy's fingers spasmed and Steve shouted again, fingers tightening in Billy's hair and holding him down till he choked, saliva flooding his mouth and making the slide of his lips easier on Steve's dick. He gripped Steve's thigh hard enough to bruise to ground himself and hummed, did it again when he could feel Steve's blood pulse hot against his tongue where it pressed against the big vein on the underside.

Words slipped out between the gasps and groans falling from Steve's lips that Billy barely heard; he tugged at Billy's hair to get his attention, till Billy slipped off, trailing spit from his mouth to the tip of Steve's dick. "My room," Steve said, fingers running lines of fire over Billy's lips and cheeks. "Wanna fuck you. Wanna fuck you so bad."

All the breath left Billy's body, and he surged up to smash his lips against Steve's in a graceless kiss, teeth clacking together, spit and precome mixing as their tongues slid against each other.

Fuck, he wanted Steve to fuck him. Was already going to feel Steve in the soreness of his throat and jaw tomorrow. Wanted the memory of Steve inside him, stretching him open, till he could almost pretend Steve was claiming him, wanted him as bad as he wanted Steve.

They stumbled their way to the bedroom, Billy's mind in a static blur, dimly lit images of skin and dark, smiling eyes and drunk, fumbling fingers flashing by in the kitchen light spilling down the hallway. Those fingers popped the rest of the buttons on his shirt, sliding it off

his shoulders to pool on the carpet. Billy dragged Steve's pants off to join it, catching Steve again when he hopped on one foot and then the other to get them off and nearly fell again.

By the time they reached the bedroom, Steve was naked and beautiful, glowing like a goddamn angel in the light of the streetlamps filtering through Steve's curtains. Billy went easily when Steve shoved him to the bed, always fucking falling for Steve. He lifted his hips so Steve could drag his pants down his legs and off, grinned at the quiet, "fuck," when Steve realized Billy wasn't wearing underwear. His head fell back as his cock was freed from the confines of his jeans, and he fisted his hands in Steve's sheets with a gasp at the sudden shock of cold air on exposed skin.

Head rolling to the side, he barely took in brief flashes of Steve's room. Steve still had that fucking nailbat for some inexplicable reason, leaned up against the wall between his dresser and his closet door. Billy never had gotten a straight answer about that bat, but tonight he had more important things on his mind. More important things, like Steve crawling between his spread legs, eyes skating up his body and leaving shivering need in their wake. Dark eyes caught on his, a pink tongue darting out to wet bitten red lips, and Billy squeezed his eyes shut, turning his head against the intensity in Steve's gaze.

He squeezed his eyes shut tighter when Steve leaned down, blanketing Billy's body with his own, and kissed him, so soft Billy wanted to cry. He opened his mouth on a whimper, hands flying up to grab at Steve's shoulders when Steve's tongue slipped in his mouth, mapping out the contours of his teeth and tongue and tasting like vodka and cheap beer and Steve Steve Steve.

It was too much. It wasn't enough. He was going to die here tonight, but he at least wanted to get Steve inside him first.

"Where's... lube?" he gasped into Steve's mouth. Steve shifted, drawing his tongue out of Billy's mouth and kissing down his jaw before pressing his face into Billy's collarbone and just breathing.

"Top drawer by the bed," he said finally, in between mouthing at Billy's pulse point. He may as well have said the moon for all Billy

cared, lost in the stars exploding behind his eyelids when Steve accompanied the kisses by grinding down, his spit-slick dick sliding against Billy's own before slipping between his thighs to rub against the sensitive skin behind his balls, trapping Billy's cock between their stomachs, rubbing against the coarse hair on Steve's belly.

After a few minutes of grinding, Steve's weight finally shifted, and Billy heard the sound of a drawer opening, the click of a bottle cap and the crinkling of condom packaging.

Everything after that blurred together, no matter how hard Billy tried to keep himself in the moment, thoughts breaking apart with the pleasure of Steve's fingers working him open, Steve's cock filling him up, Steve's mouth finding its way back to his mouth and neck and chin and jaw in messy kisses.

"Please please please," he whispered, or maybe, "Steve Steve Steve," he couldn't tell, and Steve answered him either way, hips snapping hard and fast till Billy was keening wordlessly, arching up to meet each of Steve's thrusts and baring his neck to Steve's teeth, nails raking frantically up and down the smooth skin of Steve's back.

His orgasm hit him without warning, mind whiting out with pleasure as Steve kept fucking him through it, rhythm faltering before picking back up, dick slamming into his oversensitive body and splitting him open. He wrapped trembling legs around Steve's back, encouraging Steve deeper and harder till Steve was trembling too on top of him, breathing sweet nonsense into Billy's ear that had Billy moaning and whining again, pretty desperate things that Billy wanted so badly to believe.

When it was over, after Steve came with Billy's name breathed between their lips, Steve slumped boneless on top of him. Billy's whole body trembled as the last embers of wildfire desire cooled in his chest, one hand still trailing light fingers over Steve's back.

Sweat and semen cooled sticky between them, but all Steve made any move to do when he finally rolled off Billy was pull off the condom, throwing it haphazardly towards the trashcan in the corner, uncaring when it hit the wall a full foot away. "Sleep now?" he mumbled, and cuddled into the crook of Billy's arm, making little annoyed noises till

Billy pulled the covers up and wrapped his arms around him.

If he could have, Billy would have stayed in the moment forever. Would have stopped the sun from rising, stopped time right there with Steve pressed into his side and already snoring on his chest, and been content.

But time stopped for no man, least of all a man like Billy. He knew what was coming in the morning, when Steve was sober and not blinded by the desire to get his dick in a warm, wiling body, and he didn't think he could survive it. Facing rejection from Steve the first time had almost broken him. Watching those big eyes squint and twist in disgust while he was rejected a second time would be too much for his still cracked heart.

Steve whined and curled towards him when Billy slid his arm out from under him. He rolled over, bare feet hitting the rug by Steve's bed, and leaned down to grab a dirty shirt off the floor, ignoring the way Steve curled immediately into the warm space left by his body. He would definitely need a shower, but he cleaned himself enough with the shirt to feel marginally less gross dragging his jeans back up his hips. His socks were on the floor by the trashcan, and he found his shirt crumpled in the hallway, smelling faintly of Steve when he pulled it over his head. He gathered the rest of his things by the door, glancing back only once before he slipped out into the hallway and began the cold trek back to his own place.

It was late enough that few other people were still on the streets. Late enough that no one paid attention to the scowling young man with his head of messy blond curls bowed down against the wind and his hands in pockets, eyes bright with tears that he swiped at angrily and an ache in his stomach he blamed on the tequila shots from a lifetime ago.

Notes for the Chapter:

So there is angst, but as the tags say, it will not last forever. Comments always make me really happy - I love hearing what people think!

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this took approximately 90 million years. My only excuse is that I have no excuse, besides being a lazy and easily distractible writer. But if anyone is still waiting on an update, chapter 3 is finally here! I'd say chapter 4 won't take so long, but I don't want to make promises I can't keep. So instead I will say that I am going to try really really hard to ensure chapter 4 doesn't take as long, but even if it does, I'm not abandoning this story.

The pounding in his head dragged Steve into wakefulness on Saturday morning. "Ugh," he muttered, shoving his sweaty face into his pillow. Sunlight drilled through the thin blinds into his temples, and he considered whether or not he could pull off never leaving his bed ever again. It was so soft, so comfortable, so warm with the lingering heat of another body.

Steve sat up so fast his head spun and he nearly ralphed all over his blankets.

Fuck.

He doubled over, groaning, and tried to listen for the sound of movement anywhere else in the apartment. There was nothing. Only the regular sounds of his neighbors in the surrounding apartments and his own pained moaning met his ears. Billy was gone.

Steve dragged himself out of bed anyway, forced his protesting limbs to move as he searched the tiny apartment to convince himself of that fact. The whole search took him all of thirty seconds, even after he double checked the bathroom to convince himself that Billy really wasn't hiding out in the shower for some reason.

At last, he collapsed on the ratty couch in the living room, doubling over with his head in his hands.

He'd fucked up so fucking bad. His head throbbed with the combination of old guilt, new guilt, and the hangover he more than deserved for being such a fucking idiot.

The club had been a stupid idea. Seeing Billy the previous day had fucked with Steve's head, brought up all kinds of memories that still sent guilt and misery swarming through his gut. He'd never imaged he would see the first guy he'd ever fallen in love with again, and certainly not out of the fucking blue while he was working at a little diner as a waiter, covered in grease stains and smelling of cheap coffee and oil when Billy, by contrast, looked even *better* than he had in high school, when they'd been two dumb kids fooling around.

At least, fooling around was what Steve had called it. The look in Billy's eyes when Steve had said as much, right before moving to Indianapolis and never trying to talk to Billy again like fucking coward, had said clear enough that it had been more than that to him.

He should never have gotten drunk and taken Billy home and fucked him without talking first. He *fucking deserved* to wake up and find Billy gone.

He'd *meant* to talk to Billy. Had begged Beth to take over serving while he went off to hide, because he was still a giant coward, but he'd wanted to talk. He had just needed to give his head time to stop fuzzing out at the sight of Billy looking so fucking good, time to come up with something to say that wasn't either stupid or crazy. Steve still felt a little crazy. Felt like a million years and no time at all had passed since the last time he'd had Billy in his bed in Hawkins, when he'd still been too hung up on Nancy and his bleak future and his dad and *bullshit* to appreciate what had been right in front of him.

Since then, he'd tried to move on. He'd fucked a couple different guys and dated a few girls and got fired by his dad for being a giant queer after one too many days of feeling like his soul was being crushed right out of his body had led to a screaming fight about why he couldn't just try harder, be smarter, do better, *I just don't understand you, Steve, don't you know you'll never find a nice girl to marry if you don't shape up?* And Steve had blurted out that he was getting pretty damn good at sucking dicks, actually, so maybe he'd find a nice guy

to take care of him instead. Looking back, he probably could have handled *that* conversation better, too.

It was only a lucky encounter with Beth and her partner, Audrey, that had stopped Steve from dying in a gutter, probably. But in the two years since then, he had managed to build himself a pretty respectable life, one that didn't rely on his dad constantly handing him everything when he couldn't do anything for himself. He had a job that made him feel like he was being useful to someone even if it wasn't glamorous and didn't pay much, and friends who cared about who he was instead of who they wanted him to be. He'd cried a few times on Beth's shoulder about Billy after too many drinks, but that didn't have to mean he wasn't moving on.

Except that clearly, he hadn't moved on one fucking bit. All it had taken was seeing Billy *one time* to send him into a tailspin. Beth was going to be so disappointed.

The thought of what Beth was going to say finally got him to move, dragging himself off his couch so he could make coffee and get ready for work. She was going to be so pissed at him. For Billy, and for coming into work hungover. At least he had a later shift today, so he wasn't too appallingly late.

Sure enough, the first thing Steve was met with when he shoved his way into the diner with his head ducked down against the cold wind outside was Beth's judgmental raised eyebrow. "Sorry I'm late," he said, wincing at the rasp in his voice.

"You gonna tell me what has you showing up ten minutes after your shift started looking like a drowned rat?" she asked, and Steve winced. She'd been so good to him, giving him a job when he was just a fucked-up kid digging his way towards rock bottom. Usually he was a lot better than this. He wanted to show her how grateful he was for her kindness, for basically saving his life.

"I'll tell you later," he promised.

She frowned at him in consideration. Those piercing eyes of hers felt like they were stripping him bare to the soul, but finally she nodded. "You better. Now hurry up and get to work. It looks like we're gonna

have a busy lunch crowd today."

By the time his shift ended, his headache had cleared up, but his heartache remained. He clocked out and collapsed at a table where Beth was waiting with a cup of coffee and a burger. She was kind enough to let him plow through the food before she asked any questions. He finished the burger slowly, but eventually there was no more excuse to continue delaying the conversation. He looked up, grabbing a handful of napkins to wipe grease and ketchup from his fingers, and winced at the expression of concern on her face. "I really am sorry I was late today," he said, tearing a napkin into strips. "It won't happen again, I swear."

She sighed and laid one hand over his, stilling his restless fingers. "I'm hardly going to fire you, kid," she said, and Steve let out a breath he hadn't been aware he'd been holding. "I don't like when you're late, but you've been a good hard worker for as long as I've known you. I'm not kicking you out over one mistake. I just want to know that you're okay." She paused, and he made himself look up at her. "That boy who came in yesterday, he's the one you were in love with back in high school, right?"

Steve nodded miserably. "I was such an ass, and I really hurt him," he said, staring back down at the table.

"He still mean that much to you? It's been, what, four years?"

"Three and a half."

"Alright, so you've both hopefully grown up a little. Maybe if he comes in again, you can try asking him on a date. See if he's willing to give you another chance. And if not, you're a cute kid, and you'll find someone. If you ever need some time off to deal with heartbreak, honey, I'm a lesbian. We practically invented crying over love. You just gotta *tell* me first."

Steve laughed and wished he had the right words to tell her how much he appreciated her, and how much comfort he was taking from her hand still on his. He always had been a touchy-feely person. During his drunker moments, he sometimes speculated on the lack of affection he ever got growing up, and how it seemed like he was

always trying to make up for that lack from friends and lovers both.

Even with guilt and shame still burning in his gut, Beth's touch gave him the courage to open his mouth again.

"I did something dumb last night," he admitted.

Gray eyebrows arched over dark, piercing eyes. "I could still smell the booze on you this morning. Did anyone take advantage of you while you were drinking? Do you need anything?"

Steve squeezed her fingers and looked away from all the concern that he didn't deserve. "I ran into Billy," he mumbled. "We were both pretty drunk, I think, and I took him back to my place. He was gone when I woke up." He blinked wetness from his eyes and felt like an idiot for still being surprised.

He could almost feel Beth rolling her eyes across the table.

"Did you talk to him at all," she asked in a tone like she already knew the answer, "or did you just take him to bed?"

Steve grimaced. "We mostly just, ah, didn't really talk," he said.

Beth's eyes practically rolled right out of her head at that confession. "You're not an idiot, kid, but sometimes you sure do act like one."

He winced, but didn't deny her words. "I should have apologized," he whispered to their clasped hands on the table. "I should have explained shit, and apologized, and I should have told him how I feel." He blinked against the wetness collecting on his eyelashes, sniffled as the plastic table-top swam in front of his eyes.

"You can spend a lifetime talking about what you should have done, but it doesn't change what you did," Beth said with her usual candor. "You might get a chance to try again, if he goes to the same bars you do or ever comes back here, but you might not. My advice? Plan for the future, but live for now. I've seen you mope over this boy enough to know he means a lot to you, but how much of that meaning is really about him, and how much is about your own old guilt?"

The question was a fair one. There was *plenty* of old guilt wrapped up

in Steve's memories of Billy Hargrove, that he could not deny. Even so, "I loved him," Steve said in a small voice. "I *did*, but I was too dumb to realize it and I treated him *so badly*. Beth, I broke his heart! I spent my whole last year of high school thinking I'd grown out of the asshole bully I used to be, but I was still just that mean, stupid kid who used people to make myself feel good and didn't care how much I hurt them."

Beth's snort dragged him out of his confession. "You obviously cared," she said, at his look of confusion. She cut off his protest with a wave of her hand. "Oh, you treated him poorly, too, I'm not arguing that. But you've spent too many evenings crying on my shoulder over it for me to believe you didn't care."

"I didn't care *enough*," Steve amended, and those words Beth could not contest.

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The days following passed in a haze. Steve was so grateful for Beth's presence at the diner, and more grateful still when she dragged him home with her the third day he spent his whole shift in shades of gray. Audrey hadn't been expecting an extra guest for dinner, but she was happy to set an extra place at the table. Audrey always made too much food, she said, every time Steve ever tried to apologize for imposing at such short notice. He had guessed a long time ago that he wasn't the only dumb lost kid they'd ever taken in to their hearts and their home.

Dinner with Beth and Audrey took his mind off of Billy for a few hours. Audrey was an amazing cook and a fun person, full of stories about the auto shop where she worked. Somehow, she always managed to make her constant struggle to prove her overwhelming competence as a mechanic to her male coworkers and customers hilarious instead of depressing. It could have worn her down easily, but instead it only made her work harder. Steve admired how strong she was, the way that nothing could quench the fire that burned inside her and *made* people take her seriously, in the end. Somehow, in spite of being a brown lesbian who worked in a building full of asshole men, she always managed to make her problems sound so trivial by the end. He admired the strength it took for that, too.

Eventually, though, he had to go home. As happy as he was to spend time with Beth and Audrey, his morose mood couldn't stay buried forever in distractions. By the time 10pm rolled around, a jittery feeling had lodged in his bones, and all he wanted to do was go home and mope his way through another lonely night. Audrey admonished him for not coming around enough, and extracted a promise that he would be by again soon, and then he turned his back on the patch of warmth and happiness his friends had carved out for themselves, shoved his hands deep in the pockets of his second-hand coat, and started his walk home.

He was just a block away from Beth's diner when a commotion across the road drew his eye. He stepped lightly around a puddle of gray spring slush on the sidewalk as he passed the string of innocuous gay bars lining the other side of the small street, when the door opened with a bang and spilled Billy fucking Hargrove out into the chilly gray evening. Billy stumbled out of the bar, fists shaking as he pulled a cigarette from his front pocket. He dropped it and cursed, slumping against the wall of the bar with his eyes closed. Steve didn't even think.

"Billy!" Steve called, darting across the street without thinking.

Billy's body went still. His eyes stayed closed.

"Go away, Harrington," he said as Steve shifted on the sidewalk in front of him, at a loss for what to say. Steve startled. Billy's eyes were open slits, and he was staring at Steve with a frown on his face.

"I wanted to talk to you," Steve said, a little bit helplessly.

Billy snorted and leaned his head back against the wall. "Yeah, well I don't want to talk to you."

"Okay, and I deserve that," Steve said, plowing through the discomfort. "I owe you one hell of an apology, and an explanation, and if you don't want to listen that's okay. That's fine. Wouldn't be the first time I got my heart broke by my own bullshit, but I still wanted to try."

Billy's eyes were wide open now, and he stared at Steve. As soon as

he noticed Steve looking at him, his face twisted back into a scowl.

"You don't owe me shit, Harrington," he said, glaring off to the side.
"Not like I was ever your boyfriend."

Steve winced. "I deserved that too."

Silence stretched between them, and Steve thought about leaving. Taking the easy way out, running from his problems just like had back in Hawkins a few years and a lifetime ago. It would have been so simple, to take Billy's posture at face value and walk away.

The boy who would have left had died in his father's cold and distant office, though. That was the promise he had made when he walked out the door two years ago and never went back. The Steve that he wanted to be was brave enough to be honest, and brave enough to read the hurt and the hope barely contained behind far too expressive blue eyes.

"I loved you," Steve blurted out, unable to bear the tension any longer. "I did, and we had something *real*, and I'm so fucking sorry I threw it away like it was nothing because I was *afraid*."

Billy looked small in front of him, small and vulnerable, and Steve felt old cracks in his heart split open again. "I get it if you want me to leave you alone, if the other night was just a drunken mistake, cause I was a fucking asshole and I'd deserve nothing less, but-

He didn't get to finish. Billy grabbed the fraying edges of his coat and yanked him into a nearby alley, crushing their entire bodies together so hard and fast that all the air was driven from Steve's lungs, right into Billy's mouth where it sealed over his in a searing kiss. He flailed briefly, trapped between rough bricks and Billy's equally hard and immovable body. Billy's fingers twined between his, stilling their helpless fluttering uncertainty and pinning them against the bricks as well.

The backs of Steve hands were going to be scratched to shit, but he didn't care.

"Oh," he said, when Billy broke away, blue eyes dark with lust and a

thousand other things Steve wasn't quite smart enough to untangle. "You don't have to stop." The words tumbled out without any input from his brain, disappointment thumping against his ribs when Billy moved further away.

When Billy spoke, his voice was rough, and his hands trembled in fists at his sides. "You can't do this to me, Harrington, if you don't mean it."

"I do mean it!" Steve hastened to assure him. He stepped forward, wanting very badly to touch Billy again, but lingering uncertainty kept space between them. "*I do.*"

Billy swayed forward, and Steve made the choice to stop being so fucking afraid. "I've got you, and I won't let you go this time unless you make me," he said, stepping forward again and wrapping his arms around Billy. Billy practically collapsed into him, a muffled sob shivering against Steve's shoulder as Billy clung to him. "I'm not fucking leaving again," Steve said, holding Billy as though he was afraid the other man would disappear if he let go.

For all he knew, Billy just would go and do something like that.

So Steve didn't let go, not completely, not even when they were in his apartment again, in his bed with half their clothes still on.

He had a promise to keep, and a second chance to take advantage of, and this time he wasn't going to screw it up.